

Church and Convent of St John the Baptist (Catholic)



Summaryopen/close

The Church and Convent of St John the Baptist reflects over 150 years of Catholic worship and other activity in Parnell, one of Auckland's earliest suburbs. Incorporating what is believed to be the oldest surviving Catholic church in northern New Zealand, the site also contains a well-preserved convent building erected in 1903, linked particularly to the role of religious women in education.

Opened by Bishop Jean Francois Baptiste Pompallier (1801-1871) in May 1861, the small timber church was built in a prominent position beside the Manukau (now Parnell) Road, a major thoroughfare leading from Auckland to settlements further south and east. Pompallier was founder of the Catholic Church in New Zealand, and confirmed as Bishop of Auckland shortly before the church was erected. The building initially consisted of a small rectangular nave with a tower and spire at its western end. It is considered to have been designed by the notable architect Edward Mahoney, and to be the only survivor reflecting Mahoney's early use of simple Gothic Revival forms.

A small timber convent was built for the Sisters of Mercy on adjacent land, possibly by December 1861. The Sisters were the first canonically consecrated religious women to become established in New Zealand, and the Parnell convent formed their earliest branch house in the Auckland Diocese. The Sisters played an important role in education and social welfare in early colonial Auckland, and ran both a select school and school for the poor from their premises in Parnell. From December 1862, the church became the centre of a formal parish, which was run for the next eleven years by Franciscan priests, who also undertook teaching duties. Notable subsequent parish priests included Monsignor Henry Fynes (1822-87), who ran the Diocese as Vicar General during periods when no bishop was appointed, and George Michael Lenniham (1858-1910), who became Bishop of Auckland in 1896.

An enlargement of the church building in 1898 may be linked to an expanding population and efforts by the Catholic Church to increase its role in religious education in the late nineteenth century. A private chapel for the nuns was evidently created by attaching a relocated sacristy to the south side of the nave. Five years later, the first convent was demolished to make way for a grander two-storey timber structure, which contained reception rooms and a refectory at ground floor level, and nuns' cells upstairs. Both developments were overseen by Edward Mahoney's son, Thomas - a notable architect in his own right. The church spire is said to have been previously replaced by a belfry in 1894, following damage.

Subsequent alterations to the church interior included embellishment of the sanctuary in 1931, and changes to the altar as a result of liturgical reforms in the 1960s. In 1964, the convent and its associated school were closed after more than a century of service. Minor alterations to the convent building were subsequently undertaken, including the enlargement of some internal spaces and the removal of a side porch. A small rear extension was added in 1978.

Since circa 2001, the convent building has been used as commercial offices. The church remains in use as a place of worship, a role it has retained for more than a century and a half.

